

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5051
MINORITY (202) 225-5074
<https://oversight.house.gov>

February 9, 2022

Ms. Dana Remus
Counsel to the President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Ms. Remus:

Committee on Oversight and Reform Republicans are conducting oversight of serious allegations raised against Dr. Eric Lander during his stewardship of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) that led to his resignation on February 7, 2022. Director Lander admitted to violating the OSTP and White House *Safe and Respectful Workplace Policy*, harassing staff, and reflecting poorly on the Biden Administration.¹ Information provided to Committee Republicans and reported by *Politico* confirms the toxic work environment at OSTP.² However, while media reporting indicates Director Lander's resignation was the result of "an internal White House investigation," Committee Republicans have received information indicating the White House Counsel's Office (WHCO) was notified of his behavior even prior to his confirmation in May 2021. Why the White House continued to allow Director Lander and OSTP leadership to run OSTP in this manner for over a year raises serious questions.

Media reports and Republicans' investigation show OSTP is a toxic work environment where staff fear meeting or even talking to much of OSTP leadership for fear of humiliation, demotion, and retaliation. *Politico* reports of "credible evidence of disrespectful interactions by Director Lander and OSTP leadership."³ The Biden Administration's hiring of Director Lander was already controversial in light of publicly available information that he minimized colleagues' contributions to work.⁴ Nonetheless, Director Lander began working at OSTP shortly after President Biden's inauguration in January 2021. The next month, in February 2021, OSTP employees raised concerns about his abusive behavior to WHCO.

¹ E-mail from Dr. Eric Lander, Director of OSTP, to OSTP staff, Feb. 4, 2021.

² Alex Thompson, *Biden's top science advisor bullied and demeaned subordinates, according to White House investigation*, POLITICO (Feb. 7, 2022).

³ *Id.*

⁴ See, e.g., Emily Birnbaum, *Biden's top scientist faces grilling over controversies*, POLITICO (Apr. 29, 2021).

Despite the President’s pledge of zero tolerance for employee abuse,⁵ no one in WHCO or the White House appears to have taken any action when information was provided to them about these allegations. Instead, Director Lander’s nomination was advanced without this information being disclosed to the U.S. Senate or the public. By mid-June 2021, WHCO had been notified of multiple employees raising concerns about Director Lander. At that time, no action was taken to rebuke or remove him. The toxic work environment OSTP leadership perpetuated—where employees are bullied, belittled, harassed, and retaliated against—and then seemingly excused by the White House casts serious doubts about President Biden’s pledge when he promised he would “fire [] on the spot” anyone who disrespects colleagues in his Administration.⁶

The White House’s failure to fire Director Lander when confronted with well-documented allegations against him for over a year—let alone “on the spot”—indicates a severe problem not confined to OSTP. Committee Republicans request that all employees at OSTP be fully apprised of their responsibilities under the laws and regulations regarding the protection of whistleblowers who report waste, fraud, or abuse as well as the rights of these whistleblowers not to have adverse personnel action taken against them. We remind you that retaliation against whistleblowers may constitute violations of law that carry penalties.⁷

Please provide the following documents to Committee Republicans no later than February 23, 2022:

1. Any reports describing violations of the White House or OSTP Safe and Respectful Workplace Policy by any member of OSTP’s staff;
2. All documents and communications, from January 20, 2021 to present, related to final decisions by WHCO not to pursue allegations of a toxic work environment or bullying in any White House component;
3. All documents and communications from January 20, 2021 to present, related to any background check the White House conducted on Director Lander; and
4. All communications between WHCO referring or relating to the allegations reported on by *Politico*.

Additionally, please inform Committee Republicans by February 16, 2022, whether you have communicated to OSTP staff what protections are available to whistleblowers.

To ask any follow-up questions, please contact Committee on Oversight and Reform Republican staff at (202) 225-5074. The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

⁵ Charles R. Davis, *Biden demands decency, promising staff members ‘I will fire you on the spot’ if they disrespect others*, BUSINESS INSIDER (Jan. 20, 2021).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ See, e.g., Whistleblower Protection Act of 1989, 5 U.S.C. 2302(b)(8)-(9), Pub. L. 101-12.

Sincerely,



James Comer
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Reform



Ralph Norman
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Environment

cc: The Honorable Carolyn Maloney, Chairwoman
Committee on Oversight and Reform

The Honorable Ro Khanna, Chairman
Subcommittee on Environment